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# The Power of Service-Learning

*I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I act and I understand.*

—Chinese proverb

**S**ervice-learning is a form of education in which students learn academic content and skills by engaging in needed service in the real world (Boston, 1997). Service-learning has been on educators' minds for decades. In an article summarizing the then current thinking about school-based community service, Conrad and Hedin wrote in 1991, "Only time will tell whether the current interest among politicians and educators in strengthening the service ethic of our nation's youth will be sustained or whether new priorities or the same old pressures for higher test scores and improved basic skills will keep youth service on the fringes of the political and educational agenda. We hope that decisions about whether to make service a regular feature of school practice will be informed by evidence about its value to young people" (p. 744).

So, here we are in 2005, and service-learning is still not common practice in our schools. From a study of administrators, Scales and Roehlkepartain (2004) found that only 3 in 10 U.S. schools utilize service-learning. Seventy percent of the principals who do not provide service-learning indicated that the reason for this is that service-learning is *not required* by any standards that drive schools today. Middle and high school principals who are not incorporating service-learning also indicated that there is simply no room in the curriculum, and there are no resources available, for anything that is not seen as helping to comply with the No Child Left Behind act or raising testing scores. I believe that this book will help to change that perception.

Some teachers are having trouble just keeping up with the daily demands of the classroom. Some are confused about what constitutes service-learning, some doubt its effectiveness, some feel a lack of administrative support, and some feel a measure of trepidation about trying something new that may involve more work than traditional classroom teaching, at least initially. Clearly

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there is a need for evidence that service-learning is an instructional strategy that is effective in meeting standards and achieving good test scores.

This chapter will address these questions by discussing the origins of service-learning, its definition and prevalence, its benefits and positive effects, and the difference between community service and service-learning. But first, let's take an inside look at a class devoted entirely to service-learning.

### ■ **A DAY IN A SERVICE-LEARNING CLASS**

Recently, I encountered a former colleague who told me about a class she offers in service-learning. Now, as a longtime advocate for service-learning and a true believer in its benefits, I was intrigued. I immediately wondered how she was able to convince her principal and board of education to offer a class for an entire semester focused *only* on service for high school credit. Most of the *high school* service-learning that I was familiar with was part of a government class or a special project connected to course content. A class with service as its primary focus was new to me. She invited me to visit, and I accepted her invitation on the spot.

#### **A Unique Experience**

Shortly thereafter, on a warm, sunny fall day, I walked into a large high school, eager to meet with the students in her service-learning class. At first, the students who filtered into class did not seem very friendly. They sat quietly, eyeing me at the front of the room, not giving a hint of what was on their minds. I took a deep breath and started talking, hoping that something I said would elicit a smile or a nod. I said, "I am very interested in what all of you think about your experiences with this service-learning class. I want to know what difference it has made for you and what you have learned." I simply stopped talking and waited.

After a pause that seemed to go on forever, the students began talking and their words overwhelmed me. I began to see real people behind the once expressionless faces. Once again, I was reminded that I, like many educators, almost missed the experience of truly knowing these students. Because there are so few opportunities for students to make genuine contributions in their schools, educators are often deprived of seeing students as people who possess resources and talents that they are willing and eager to share.

The service-learning class I visited is unusual because most service-learning experiences are part of an established curriculum or are considered to be an extracurricular activity. This class, however, offers students the chance to earn .5 credits toward their graduation requirements through participation in service activities. I am sure this class is attractive to some students because of its nonacademic focus. The class engages students in service, but the service is not directly connected to the content in their other courses. Students focus entirely on the "other side" of service-learning—personal and social development. Of course, when they sign up, they are unaware of the transformation in themselves that is about to occur.

The class I observed was made up of 13 high school students, 10 females and 3 males, in tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. They engaged in a variety of activities: teaching third grade students about tobacco, assisting teachers in gym classes for special needs students, reading and role-playing with younger students, and assisting the elders at a local nursing home. They worked with special needs students within their own district and with regular education students at the elementary and junior high levels. On days when there was no service, they met to process and reflect on their experiences and to make plans for their next service experience. Their service was scheduled for every other day during the longer blocks of time.

### **The Students—Their Stories, Their Learning**

One student told a story about “Joey,” a special needs student who often acted out during class. She told how, while assisting in his classroom, she was able to get Joey to calm down and get to work when the teacher’s attempts to do so had not been successful. She attributed her success to the fact that she and Joey had developed a relationship, and that he looked up to her and wanted her approval. That relationship, she concluded, was why he listened to her when she told him to stop his distracting behavior and get busy. This young woman clearly felt empowered by this positive experience, and she was able to make a powerful observation about human relationships that she will take into her adult life.

I then asked, “What would you like people to know about service-learning?” A young man said that he would like people to know that he and his classmates have made a really big impact on the kids and elders they work with, and that they are positive role models. He said that both the kids and the elders are eager to see them when they arrive and look forward to the days when the service class works with them. He observed that the kids and the elders seemed happier and more animated when the teens arrived.

Another student quickly added that the kids and elders that they worked with actually have had a big impact on them as well. She stressed that she feels happier on the days she does her service because working with kids lifts her mood. Other students concurred and spoke of having been in bad moods often and not feeling happy, but having had the experience of this class, feeling much happier in general. These students agree that service-learning changes you as a person. One student reported that she is more accepting of other people and is more able to control her anger because of her service-learning experience.

A student with special needs shared that when it was necessary to have a permission slip to go to the service sites, she never forgot that slip. Many other important things may still have been forgotten, but not that slip. There was no way she wanted to miss out on the opportunity to work with the younger students and elders. The regular education students reported never missing or skipping a day of school when it was a service day.

One student said that her grades had gone up because she realized that if she was telling younger kids to study hard and do their homework, then she ought to do it too. In fact, she reported that she made the high honor roll for the

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first time ever. Another student said that since she began teaching younger students about the dangers of smoking, she knew that she must never be seen smoking herself. She said she felt a responsibility to do what she said so that she wouldn't be hypocritical. Even though she sometimes smokes, she no longer does so in malls or other public places for fear that one of her students may see her. She has internalized a heightened sense of responsibility and awareness of role modeling that will serve her well in her adult life. The students reported to me that they feel they are righting the bad impressions that people often have of high school kids. They knew that their behavior was observed, and that they were giving teens a better name because of what they were doing.

Another benefit of this class, students said, was that they liked having experiences that they could talk about with their parents or the other adults in their lives. Their experiences gave them a starting point for conversation that offered them an opportunity to share what they had learned and to apply it to their own lives. They said that their parents were often surprised at the maturity of their statements and the abilities that they did not know their children were developing.

Students in this class have observed a big change in the teachers in the elementary school. They said that when they first started to go the junior high and elementary schools, teachers and other staff looked at them suspiciously. It was such an odd occurrence to see older students enter their buildings that elementary staffs immediately looked for the adult with the group to explain why they were in their school. Later, those same adults were excited to see them enter their buildings because they saw that they were having a positive impact on their students. They now trusted them.

By the end of this class, I was seeing these students with new eyes. They were no longer the aloof people who did not smile at a stranger. They were young adults learning lessons that will last a lifetime. They were kind, insightful people full of resources with dreams for their future. Two young men reported that they were considering becoming teachers after having had the opportunity to teach younger students. This class taught students lessons that will last a lifetime.

### ■ THE IMPACT OF SERVICE-LEARNING

The strategy of service-learning is like a vehicle that transports students to places they could only hope to go in a regular classroom experience. Through service-learning, and its integration of classroom work and service opportunities, students learn subject matter and develop personally. After having read the story of the service-learning class in this chapter, you may be wondering how arranging to have high school students perform particular services for others and then talk about their experiences could be so powerful. In this particular model of service-learning, the service performed was the focus. Their service was the vehicle that moved students toward increased self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-understanding. This service-learning class was designed for outcomes other than enhanced course content and increased academic achievement. The class was designed to connect students to school and to facilitate

personal development. The teacher used service to others as the strategy to accomplish this. In other service-learning models, course content drives the service-learning, and social and personal development are ancillary.

The critical aspects of service-learning that help students develop personally and socially include connection to caring adults, cooperation among students, appreciation of one another's talents and areas of challenge, development of empathy, appreciation of different systems, awareness of personal competence, and application of knowledge to real-life situations. In a very real sense, service-learning often helps developing students to begin to answer the questions "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?" After having had an opportunity to contribute their talents, students may find out what they can do and what they enjoy doing. Students, like the two young men who are considering becoming teachers, actually begin to picture themselves doing certain jobs and begin to envision ways to use their experiences in their futures.

Service-learning offers students opportunities to participate in meaningful ways. When students are asked to participate and to contribute their talents, there is an assumption made that they have talents. For some students, especially those who struggle academically, socially, and/or behaviorally, this is transformational. Offering students opportunities to contribute speaks volumes to them about how they are perceived. The offer to become involved in service communicates to them that they are capable, necessary, valued, and competent.

## THE ORIGINS OF SERVICE-LEARNING AS AN EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY ■

Service-learning began in the 1960s and went almost totally unnoticed until the 1980s when it began developing rapidly. It is both a practice and a philosophy of education, which began with John Dewey, one of our early-20th-century educational leaders. Dewey planted the seeds of service-learning through his philosophy of education and social reform. His ideas were later elaborated on by two educators, Kolb and Freire (Tai-Seale, 2000).

## HOW IS SERVICE-LEARNING DEFINED? ■

Service-learning has been defined by many organizations. According to Billig (2000, p. 659), the Corporation for National Service defines it very comprehensively in this way:

A method whereby participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that

- is conducted in and meets the needs of a community
- is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community

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- helps foster civic responsibility
- is integrated into and enhances the (core) academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled
- provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience

### ■ THE PREVALENCE OF SERVICE-LEARNING

In 1999, a survey conducted by National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) found that 32% of public schools organized service-learning as part of their curriculum (Westat, 1999). Researchers have discovered that many teachers all over the country are implementing service-learning in a variety of ways and, no doubt, with varying degrees of success. The 1999 survey provided the first reliable estimate of U.S. schools providing service-learning. This survey also tracked the type of support that is afforded teachers who are implementing service-learning projects. It found that 83% of teachers received support, but when the numbers are broken down, that support is not usually long term or systemic. Only 15% of teachers received extra planning time for service-learning activities, only 11% received a reduction in course load, and only 3% were hired as full-time service-learning coordinators (Westat, 1999). In spite of this lack of ongoing support, some teachers have adopted service-learning as one of their educational strategies. This may be because they see such positive results that they are willing to go the extra mile it takes to implement quality service-learning experiences for their students. It may also be that enlightened administrators encourage them to do so!

### ■ COMMUNITY SERVICE OR SERVICE-LEARNING?

Before we go much further, it is important to clear up the confusion between community service (volunteering) and service-learning. Many people continue to confuse these two activities that are actually quite different. In fact, community service has often borne the stigma of punishment. Many people equate community service with some type of reprimand that forces a person to provide hours of service as retribution for a wrongful act. Volunteering does not carry this same stigma, but rather, it is an optional activity that depends on the energy and good-will of those who engage in it. *Service-learning* is an educational term that describes an approach with the intended outcome of increased academic and personal learning. This learning is done through the connection of service to curriculum and students' structured reflection on the service experience. While community service and service-learning share the attribute of service to others, only service-learning consistently incorporates the elements of reflection and connection to curriculum.

Probably the most important aspect of service-learning is the time spent in reflection on the experience. Reflection can be done in myriad ways, depending on the desired outcome of the experience, the style of the learner, or the

teacher's assignment. *Structured reflection* on the service experience differentiates service-learning from volunteering. It is when this reflection is done well that students' learning is deepened and critical thinking skills are honed.

There is value for students in volunteering, and there is even more value for them in service-learning. In a study comparing differences between community service and service-learning, Furco (2002) compared three groups of students. The study found that students who performed service to others developed more positive attitudes toward school, themselves, others, the future, and their communities. Those who performed no service at all did not acquire these positive benefits. Those who experienced meaningful service-learning activities in which they had responsible, adultlike roles were most positively affected by their experiences because these students felt empowered by the experience.

### SERVICE FIRST OR LEARNING FIRST? ■

As Eyler and Giles (1999) wrote, "A lot of energy has been devoted to defining service-learning. In 1990 Jane Kendall wrote that there were 147 definitions in the literature, and there has been no falling away of interest in this endeavor since" (p. 3). In light of this dilemma, probably one of the most useful contributions to pinning down this strategy is summarized below:

Service-LEARNING	focus is primarily on learning goals and secondarily on service
SERVICE-learning	focus is on service primarily and learning secondarily
Service learning	service and learning goals are separate
SERVICE-LEARNING	focus is equally on service and learning, each enhancing the other

Source: Sigmon (1996).

This perspective is especially helpful for people who are struggling with the "right" way to do service-learning. If students are engaged in a service project, is it considered service-learning? The answer to that question lies in what else is happening in addition to the service. Is there structured reflection? Does the project have clear goals for the student and the project? Does the service meet a genuine need? Do students get involved in the planning and implementation of the service? Do they evaluate the project for effectiveness? Do students have an opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned from the experience? Is there a connection made between the service and the curriculum?

A service-learning class like the class described in this chapter is one way to implement the strategy. This class focused on *service*, and the learning took place when the students reflected on the experience. For the most part, learning centered on the students' personal development. There are also ways to utilize the strategy of service-learning that focus on *learning*. In the service-LEARNING approach, service activities are directly related to the subject matter in the

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curriculum. Students' learning is enhanced and deepened through the service activities, and their critical thinking and problem-solving skills are activated by the opportunity to apply their knowledge in practical ways. The service-learning approach chosen by a teacher depends on the outcomes he or she desires for students.

### ■ WHO BENEFITS FROM SERVICE-LEARNING?

No matter the form of service-learning, service and reflection can produce many desirable results: connection to school and learning through meaningful engagement of talents, personal and social skill development, and connection to caring adult role models and peers in school and community settings. These are desirable for all students, but for kids who are marginally connected to school, these potential outcomes can help to prevent their becoming dropouts.

The National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University stated that "service-learning is a teaching/learning method that connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning, personal growth, civic responsibility, and preparation for the world of work. It can be a powerful vehicle for real school reform at all grade levels, K-12, as well as higher education" (Duckenfield & Wright, 1999, p. 1).

Service-learning is not only for difficult-to-engage students. All students benefit from connecting their learning to the real world. All students also benefit from increased connection with adults and with their communities. All students need to see that what they learn has meaning, and service-learning is one way to do this. For students who are thriving in school, service-learning enhances their school experiences and stimulates opportunities for advanced learning.

### ■ THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning has many benefits for students that entice teachers to implement this strategy in their teaching. Billig's (2000) compilation of research lists these positive effects of K-12 school-based service-learning:

1. Students who participate are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.
2. Service-learning has a positive effect on students' interpersonal development and ability to relate to culturally diverse groups.
3. Service-learning helps develop students' sense of civic responsibility and citizenship skills.
4. Service-learning helps students acquire academic skills and knowledge.
5. Students who participate in service-learning are more engaged with their studies and more motivated to learn.
6. Service-learning is associated with increased attendance.



7. Service-learning helps students become more realistic about careers.
8. Service-learning results in greater mutual respect between teachers and students.
9. Service-learning leads to more positive perceptions of school and youths on the part of community members. (p. 661)

## FINAL WORDS ■

There is no prescription for service-learning, although the National Service-Learning Corporation, National Youth Leadership Council has defined Essential Elements of Effective Service-Learning Practice. These are presented in Chapter 3. All types of service-learning have value, from the simplest to the most involved. Educators, hopefully with the help of their students, are free to devise projects that meet their particular needs regarding subject content and community linkages. Some organizations, including the Maryland Student Service Alliance ([www.mssa.sailorsite.net/ideas.html](http://www.mssa.sailorsite.net/ideas.html)), have noted that service-learning projects fall along a continuum from direct service to indirect service to advocacy. Projects considered to be *direct service* involve students working face-to-face with people in the school or larger community, or actively engaged in an activity such as planting gardens. *Indirect service* projects involve students in efforts such as collecting food or toiletries for the needy. They often take place at the school site, and students channel resources to the needy rather than interacting directly with individuals needing the service. *Advocacy* entails students lending their voices and talents to draw attention to or help to eliminate the causes of a problem. Making speeches, writing letters, and making presentations are examples of advocacy.

Teachers all over the country are engaging students in helping activities in their schools and classrooms. As you read this book, think about how your students are already involved in active ways. Some schools have peer tutoring or peer mediation programs. Others have programs similar to Big Brothers/Big Sisters where older students buddy with younger ones to assist them in academic or social ways. These are wonderful activities that help to make schools exciting and caring places. As you will see in Chapter 3, moving from helping activities to service-learning does not have to be a daunting step. Before we get to that step, however, let's take a look in the next chapter at what the research says about effective service-learning.